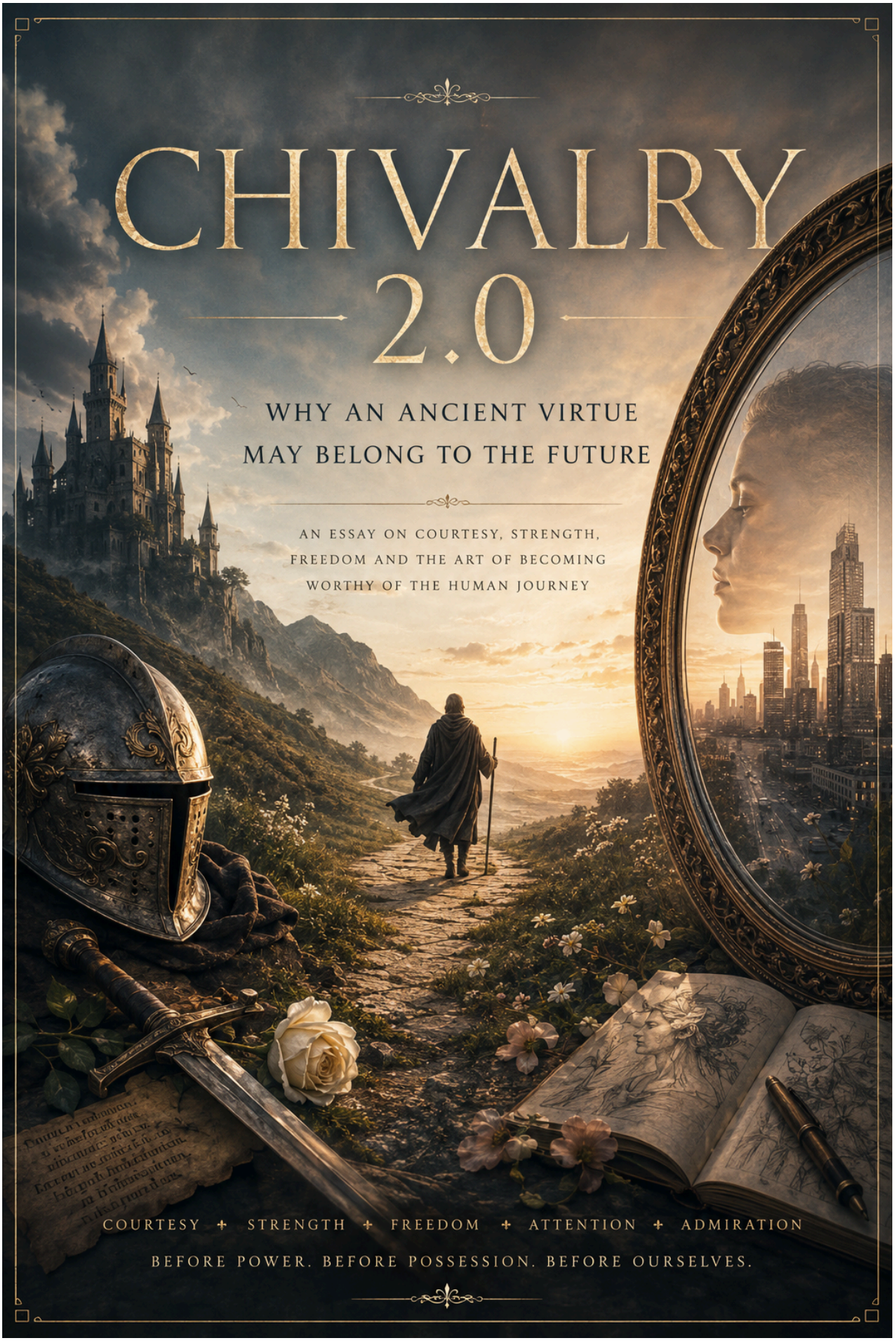

CHIVALRY
2.0
WHY AN ANCIENT VIRTUE
MAY BELONG TO THE FUTURE
AN ESSAY ON COURTESY, STRENGTH,
FREEDOM AND THE ART OF BECOMING
WORTHY OF THE HUMAN JOURNEY
COURTESY + STRENGTH + FREEDOM + ATTENTION + ADMIRATION
BEFORE POWER. BEFORE POSSESSION. BEFORE OURSELVES.

Chivalry 2.0

Why an Ancient Virtue May Belong to the Future

Part I

The Forgotten Meaning of Chivalry

The word *chivalry* has become a cultural embarrassment. It conjures images of armoured knights, damsels awaiting rescue, tournaments staged for aristocratic vanity, and a social order whose inequalities most of us would neither wish to defend nor revive. If the term appears in public conversation at all, it is usually as a relic—something quaint enough to smile at, or problematic enough to dismiss.

Perhaps this judgment is justified.

Medieval Europe was neither egalitarian nor particularly gentle. It was a world shaped by hierarchy, privilege, violence, and deeply unequal expectations of men and women alike. Yet history has an odd habit of hiding enduring ideas inside temporary institutions. Democracy survived the disappearance of the Greek polis. Scientific inquiry escaped the monastery. The university outlived the scholastic worldview that gave birth to it.

Perhaps chivalry, too, deserves to be separated from the historical circumstances that first gave it form.

For the essential question is not whether medieval knights should return.

It is whether the human problem that chivalry attempted to answer has disappeared.

Every civilization has sought a language through which strength could become something other than domination. Ancient Greece cultivated *paideia*, the education of character. Rome admired *virtus*, the disciplined exercise of public responsibility. Medieval Europe spoke of honour, courtesy, fidelity and service. Renaissance humanists rediscovered dignity through learning. Enlightenment thinkers placed increasing

confidence in reason and law, while modern societies have largely entrusted ethical life to institutions, markets and rights.

Each vocabulary differs profoundly.

Yet beneath them lies a remarkably similar concern.

How does a human being become powerful without becoming merely dangerous?

This question is older than Christianity, older than Europe, perhaps as old as civilization itself. It does not ask how strength may be acquired. History has never lacked strong individuals. Rather, it asks how strength might voluntarily accept limits.

That word—*voluntarily*—is the key.

Nature imposes limits.

Law imposes limits.

Poverty imposes limits.

None of these is virtue.

Virtue begins only where restraint becomes a free act.

The popular image of chivalry mistakes courtesy for etiquette. One imagines polished table manners, ceremonial gestures, perhaps opening doors or offering one's seat. These customs may indeed descend from older traditions, yet they are only the visible residue of something considerably deeper.

Courtesy originally described an orientation before it described behaviour.

It asked a simple but demanding question: *What kind of person must I become before my actions deserve admiration?*

Notice how different this is from the modern tendency to ask whether actions are efficient, successful or authentic.

The question concerns the formation of the self rather than the achievement of objectives.

This difference may explain why chivalry feels both strangely distant and strangely familiar.

We live in an age fascinated by self-expression. We are encouraged to discover ourselves, define ourselves, reinvent ourselves, communicate ourselves. The individual has become the principal moral actor of our age. Freedom increasingly means the removal of external constraints upon personal identity.

Much of this liberation represents genuine moral progress.

Yet freedom carries its own temptations.

One can become so absorbed in expressing oneself that one forgets to cultivate oneself.

The distinction is subtle.

Expression asks that the world notice us.

Cultivation asks whether we have become worth noticing.

Here the twentieth-century philosopher Simone Weil enters with remarkable quietness.

Few thinkers wrote less about chivalry than Weil, yet few illuminate its forgotten heart more clearly. Reflecting upon attention, work, suffering and grace, she arrived at an idea almost scandalously simple:

attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.

At first glance the sentence appears almost modest.

Its implications are immense.

Attention requires the temporary suspension of the ego. One ceases, if only for a moment, to classify, manipulate, consume or judge. Reality is permitted to appear before it is appropriated.

To attend is therefore not merely to observe.

It is to make room.

The deepest expressions of medieval courtesy attempted precisely this. Contrary to popular caricature, they were never solely concerned with displaying refinement or demonstrating masculine superiority. At their philosophical best, they cultivated an inner disposition in which another person—or indeed another ideal—could command reverence without being reduced to possession.

Courtesy was not a weakness.

It was a disciplined strength.

The Swiss historian of ideas Denis de Rougemont helps us understand why this mattered. In his remarkable study *Love in the Western World*, he argues that Europe invented something historically unusual: a conception of love that deliberately resisted immediate fulfilment. Courtly love was never primarily interested in marriage or domestic happiness. It transformed desire into a form of education.

To modern readers this often appears absurd.

Why prolong longing when fulfilment is possible?

The medieval imagination answered with unexpected seriousness.

Because desire itself can mature.

The beloved remained partially distant not because distance was pleasant, but because it forced admiration to become something more than appetite. Longing acquired patience. Attraction acquired discipline. Love ceased to be merely an event and became a school of character.

This should not be romanticised.

Courtly literature contained its share of fantasy, convention and impossible idealisation. Real medieval women rarely occupied the freedom granted to their literary counterparts. The social inequalities of the age remain undeniable.

Yet ideas often exceed the societies that first articulate them.

The historical institution may perish while the philosophical intuition survives.

What if the beloved was never simply a woman?

What if she represented an orientation?

The Irish philosopher Iris Murdoch offers a striking answer. Throughout her philosophical writings she insisted that morality begins not with rules but with vision. Human beings habitually imprison others inside fantasies generated by vanity, fear, desire or self-interest. Genuine love begins when another person is finally perceived as real rather than useful.

Murdoch called this process "unselfing."

One does not become less alive.

One simply ceases to occupy the centre of every picture.

Suddenly the connection becomes difficult to ignore.

Weil speaks of attention.

Murdoch speaks of truthful vision.

The poets of courtly love speak of courtesy.

Different centuries.

Different vocabularies.

A remarkably similar movement of the soul.

None begins with conquest.

All begin with perception.

Another overlooked thinker, the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren, deepens the picture still further. His distinction between *eros* and *agape* has often been simplified into a contrast between selfish desire and selfless love. Nygren's actual insight is subtler. *Eros* reaches upward toward what it admires; *agape* bends downward toward what simply exists.

Human flourishing requires both.

Without admiration, life loses aspiration.

Without generosity, admiration becomes elitism.

The finest expressions of chivalry attempted, however imperfectly, to unite these two movements. One sought excellence while remaining bound by responsibility. One admired beauty while recognising the dignity of ordinary persons. One cultivated distinction without abandoning humility.

Perhaps this explains why the language of chivalry continues to fascinate long after its institutions have disappeared.

The horse is gone.

The armour rests in museums.

The feudal order has dissolved into history.

Yet the underlying question refuses to disappear.

How does freedom educate itself?

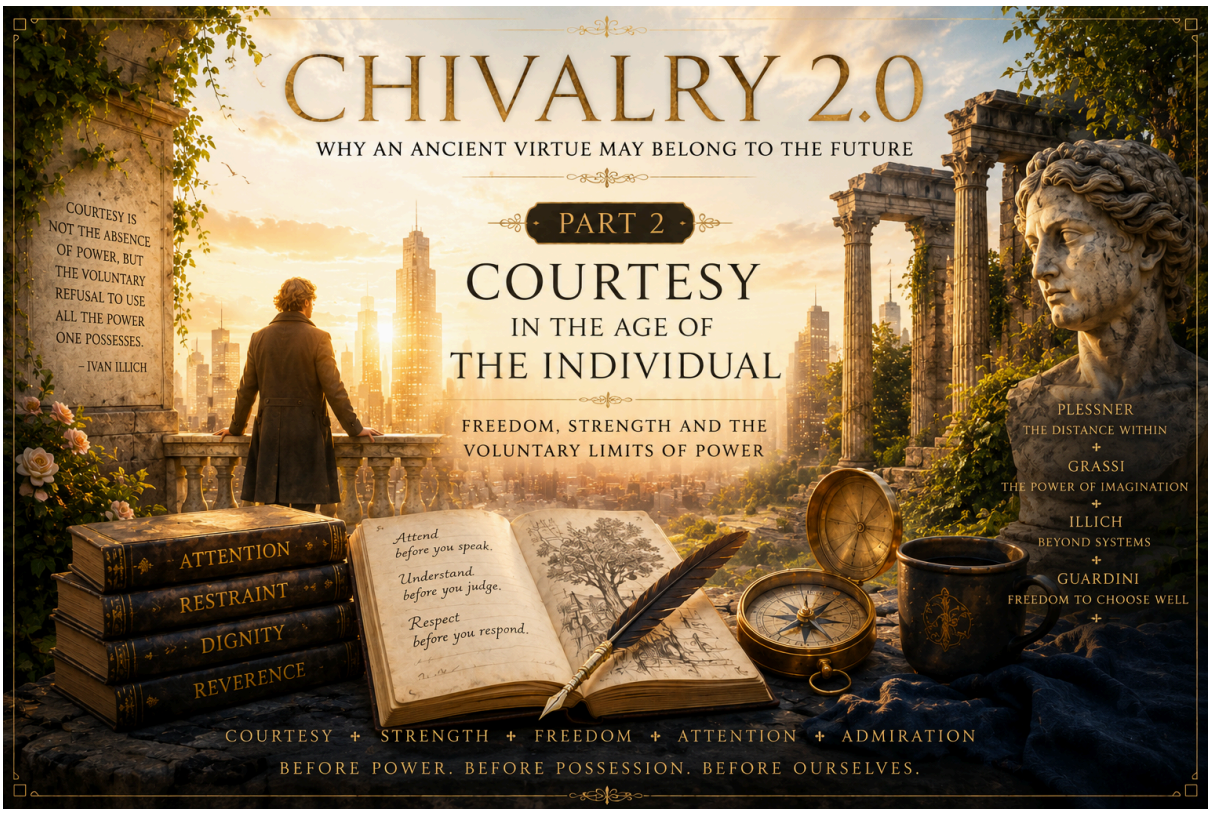
How does strength learn reverence?

How does desire become something richer than consumption?

The medieval answer was called courtesy.

Whether our own age requires another name—or whether the old one has simply been waiting to be rediscovered—remains an open question.

It is, however, a question worth asking.



Part II

Courtesy in the Age of the Individual

Freedom, Strength And The Voluntary Limits Of Power

If chivalry is to become more than a historical curiosity, it must survive the disappearance of the world that created it.

This is not as impossible as it sounds.

The deepest ethical ideas often migrate across civilizations by quietly changing their language. They abandon one set of symbols only to discover another.

The Roman citizen becomes the Renaissance humanist.

The monastic discipline becomes the scientific method.

The medieval pilgrimage becomes the modern search for authenticity.

Perhaps courtesy is waiting for its own translation.

The difficulty lies elsewhere.

Modernity has not merely replaced medieval values. It has transformed the very architecture of the self.

Never before has the individual possessed so much freedom to define who they are.

We select careers, relationships, beliefs, identities and communities with a degree of autonomy unimaginable to previous centuries.

Increasingly, we curate ourselves through images, narratives and digital performances.

We have become authors of our biographies.

This achievement should not be underestimated.

For women, minorities, queer communities and trans people, the expansion of individual freedom has not been a fashionable luxury but a profound moral victory.

Entire forms of human existence have become speakable where previously silence was demanded.

Any philosophy worthy of the future must begin by acknowledging this.

Yet every liberation produces new responsibilities.

The old world suffered from too little freedom.

The new world occasionally suffers from too little orientation.

Freedom answers the question, *What may I become?*

It cannot, by itself, answer the more difficult question:

What should I become?

The German philosopher Helmuth Plessner devoted much of his work to this peculiar condition. Unlike other animals, he argued, human beings

are never entirely identical with themselves. We live our lives while simultaneously observing ourselves living them. We become actors and spectators at once.

This strange distance is one of humanity's greatest gifts.

It allows irony.

Reflection.

Culture.

Science.

Art.

But it also makes vanity almost inevitable.

The modern individual does not merely exist.

The modern individual performs existence.

Social media has not invented this tendency; it has merely industrialised it.

We become curators of ourselves.

Every photograph, every opinion, every gesture risks becoming another brushstroke in the portrait we hope the world will admire.

There is nothing inherently immoral about this.

The danger arises only when the portrait gradually replaces the person.

At this point the Italian philosopher Ernesto Grassi offers an unexpected insight.

A student of Renaissance humanism, Grassi argued that human beings do not inhabit reality through logic alone. Before abstract concepts comes metaphor. Before argument comes imagination.

We live by images long before we explain ourselves through theories.

This may explain why the knight continues to haunt our imagination despite the collapse of the medieval world.

No one seriously wishes to restore feudalism.

Few dream of wearing chain mail.

Yet the symbols remain curiously alive.

The quest

The pilgrimage.

The dragon.

The forest.

The sword.

The lady.

These images endure because they describe interior landscapes rather than historical institutions.

The dragon is rarely another person.

More often it is arrogance.

Fear.

Cowardice.

Vanity.

Resentment.

The journey has moved inward.

Perhaps the greatest transformation concerns the meaning of strength itself.

The medieval knight possessed physical power in a world where violence remained an ordinary political language.

Our age possesses different forms of strength.

Knowledge.

Technology.

Institutional influence.

Economic capital.

Visibility.

Psychological insight.

Information.

The capacity to shape another person's life has not diminished.

It has merely become less visible.

Consequently, courtesy acquires a new importance.

The Austrian social critic Ivan Illich spent much of his life warning that modern societies quietly replace living relationships with systems. Education becomes schooling. Health becomes healthcare. Friendship becomes networking. Hospitality becomes tourism. Care becomes administration.

The more efficient institutions become, the easier it is to forget the fragile human encounters from which they originally emerged.

Courtesy belongs precisely to this forgotten territory.

No bureaucracy can manufacture it.

No algorithm can optimize it.

No legal code can require it.

Courtesy exists only where freedom voluntarily limits itself.

One can interrupt but chooses to listen.

One can humiliate but chooses restraint.

One can dominate but chooses dialogue.

One can exploit another's vulnerability but refuses.

The ethical beauty of courtesy lies precisely here.

It is not the absence of power.

It is the voluntary refusal to exercise all the power one possesses.

This distinction has become increasingly important in a civilization fascinated by efficiency.

Efficiency asks what can be done.

Courtesy asks what ought not to be done, even when nothing prevents it.

The German-Italian philosopher Romano Guardini recognised something similar when reflecting upon freedom.

Modern societies, he observed, often imagine freedom as the progressive removal of every limitation. The fewer constraints remain, the freer the individual appears.

Yet this understanding mistakes possibility for maturity.

Freedom does not consist merely in having choices.

Freedom consists in choosing well.

Every meaningful human practice quietly accepts disciplines that outsiders mistake for restrictions.

The musician submits to harmony.

The dancer submits to rhythm.

The scientist submits to evidence.

The writer submits to language.

The physician submits to the vulnerability of another body.

None experiences these disciplines as slavery.

On the contrary.

They make excellence possible.

Perhaps courtesy belongs among these voluntary disciplines.

It is not imposed from above.

It is cultivated from within.

The individual who practices courtesy has not surrendered freedom.

They have given freedom a direction.

At this point a common objection emerges.

Does such language not simply revive obedience under another name?

History offers enough examples of virtues manipulated to preserve unjust hierarchies.

Women were expected to be courteous while men remained powerful. Servants displayed humility while masters displayed authority. Entire populations were instructed to know their place.

These criticisms are historically correct.

They also miss something essential.

Courtesy worthy of the name can never be demanded from below.

It has ethical meaning only when it flows from freedom.

The moment it becomes compulsory, it ceases to be courtesy and becomes submission.

The distinction is decisive.

Submission protects power.

Courtesy questions how power should behave.

This is why Chivalry 2.0 cannot be nostalgic.

It owes no loyalty to feudal hierarchy.

It grants no privilege to masculinity.

It assigns no special moral status to birth, wealth or social rank.

Instead, it proposes something both older and more radical.

The greater one's capacity to influence others, the greater one's obligation to cultivate restraint.

In this sense, courtesy becomes profoundly democratic.

Every human being possesses some form of strength.

Every human being therefore possesses the opportunity to refuse its unnecessary display.

Perhaps this is what modern individualism has occasionally forgotten.

The purpose of becoming oneself is not simply self-expression.

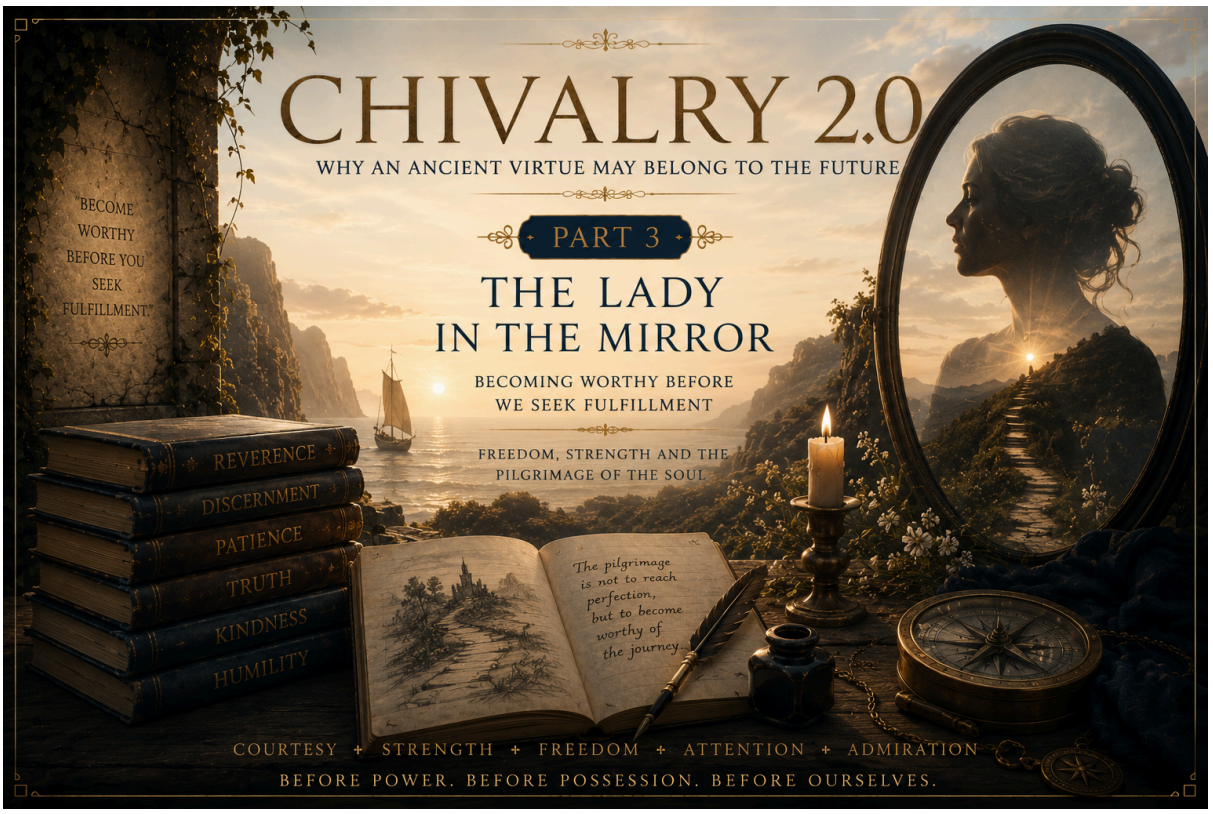
It is becoming the sort of person whose freedom enlarges the freedom of others.

The medieval world searched for this ideal through the language of honour.

Our own century may have to rediscover it through the language of dignity.

The words have changed.

The ethical task has not.


CHIVALRY 2.0
WHY AN ANCIENT VIRTUE MAY BELONG TO THE FUTURE
"BECOME WORTHY BEFORE YOU SEEK FULFILLMENT"
PART 3
THE LADY IN THE MIRROR
BECOMING WORTHY BEFORE WE SEEK FULFILLMENT
FREEDOM, STRENGTH AND THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SOUL
REVERENCE
DISCERNMENT
PATIENCE
TRUTH
KINDNESS
HUMILITY
The pilgrimage is not to reach perfection, but to become worthy of the journey.
COURTESY + STRENGTH + FREEDOM + ATTENTION + ADMIRATION
BEFORE POWER. BEFORE POSSESSION. BEFORE OURSELVES.

Part III

The Lady in the Mirror

Becoming Worthy Before We Seek Fulfillment

Every age invents its own image of human fulfillment.

For the ancient Greeks it was the harmonious citizen.

For Rome, the responsible statesman.

For the medieval world, the knight.

For modernity, increasingly, the autonomous individual.

None of these figures is simply historical.

Each represents a particular answer to the question:

What kind of person should I become?

Our own answer has been remarkably successful.

We have learned to defend individual rights, celebrate diversity and question inherited hierarchies. Millions of lives have become freer because of this transformation.

Women gained opportunities once denied to them. Queer lives found language. Trans people increasingly became subjects of their own stories rather than objects in someone else's.

These achievements deserve gratitude rather than nostalgia.

Yet freedom remains incomplete if it teaches us only how to become ourselves.

It must also teach us how to live with ourselves.

Perhaps this is where chivalry unexpectedly returns.

Not as a social code.

Not as masculine performance.

Not as historical reconstruction.

But as an ethics of becoming.

The philosopher Pierre Hadot argued that ancient philosophy was never merely a collection of ideas. It consisted of what he called "spiritual exercises"—daily practices through which one gradually transformed one's perception of reality.

Philosophy was less a doctrine than a way of inhabiting the world.

Courtesy may belong to this forgotten family.

It is not primarily something one believes.

It is something one practices.

Day after day.

Conversation after conversation.

Decision after decision.

One learns to postpone the first impulse.

To listen before answering.

To admire before possessing.

To understand before judging.

To become less fascinated by oneself and more fascinated by reality.

Courtesy is therefore not etiquette.

It is attention made habitual.

It is freedom educated by reverence.

Seen from this perspective, courtly love also reveals an unexpected depth.

Modern readers often assume that its tragedy lay in the lover's inability to possess the beloved.

Perhaps the opposite is true.

Perhaps possession was never the point.

The beloved represented a direction rather than a destination.

She existed not to satisfy desire but to transform it.

Love became an apprenticeship in becoming worthy.

This image remains astonishingly fertile.

The beloved need not be another person.

She may be

Truth.

Beauty.

Justice.

Wisdom.

Creation.

Vocation.

Anything before which the ego willingly becomes smaller without becoming humiliated.

The old poets gave this orientation a face.

They called her "the lady."

The twenty-first century may quietly relocate her.

She waits in the mirror.

Not as narcissism.

Quite the opposite.

The person reflected there is never fully possessed.

She is always arriving.

Always incomplete.

Always asking for slightly more courage, slightly more patience, slightly more honesty than yesterday.

She cannot be conquered.

She can only be approached.

With courtesy.

This image carries a particular resonance for many trans people, although it is by no means limited to them.

Transition is often misunderstood as the acquisition of a new identity.

In reality, it frequently resembles a pilgrimage.

One does not simply become another person.

One gradually becomes more truthful.

The destination continually recedes because authenticity is never a finished object.

It is a practice.

The "lady in the mirror" therefore does not represent perfection.

She represents orientation.

She reminds us that identity is not merely discovered.

It is cultivated.

And cultivation always asks something of us.

Patience.

Discipline.

Kindness.

Humility.

The willingness to begin again.

The paradox is beautiful.

The closer one approaches the ideal, the less interested one becomes in appearing ideal.

One simply wishes to become worthy of the journey.

Perhaps this was the hidden wisdom of courtly love all along.

Its purpose was never frustration.

Its purpose was education.

One learned to distinguish admiration from possession.

Longing from consumption.

Strength from domination.

Freedom from impulse.

Our civilization urgently needs these distinctions again.

We inhabit a world increasingly organised around immediacy.

Everything encourages acceleration.

Faster communication.

Faster consumption.

Faster outrage.

Faster desire.

Even personal growth risks becoming another marketplace where identities are purchased, displayed and replaced with alarming speed.

Courtesy refuses acceleration.

It insists that some things reveal themselves only through patience.

Friendship.

Trust.

Character.

Wisdom.

Love.

These cannot be downloaded.

They cannot be optimised.

They cannot be mass-produced.

They ripen.

This may explain why courtesy feels strangely revolutionary.

It asks almost nothing from institutions.

Almost nothing from governments.

Almost nothing from technology.

Instead, it asks something quietly demanding from each individual.

Become the sort of person whose presence enlarges the world of others.

Not through power.

Not through brilliance.

Not through victory.

But through the quality of your attention.

Hans Joas, reflecting upon the origin of values, argued that human beings rarely invent their deepest commitments through abstract reasoning. More often, they discover them through experiences of self-transcendence.

Something interrupts ordinary life. Something worthy of reverence appears. Our lives slowly reorganise themselves around it.

Perhaps this is exactly what courtesy preserves.

It keeps alive our capacity for reverence.

Without reverence, freedom easily becomes consumption.

Without freedom, reverence becomes obedience.

Chivalry 2.0 seeks neither.

It seeks a third possibility.

Freedom disciplined by admiration.

Strength moderated by humility.

Desire educated through attention.

This is no longer the chivalry of castles.

Nor is it the morality of commandments.

It belongs equally to women and men.

To the old and the young.

To the believer and the sceptic.

To the cisgender and the transgender.

To anyone who understands that becoming fully human is less a destination than a lifelong practice.

The knight has disappeared.

The horse has long since left the stable.

The banners have become museum pieces.

Yet the pilgrimage remains.

Perhaps it always will.

For every generation must eventually answer the same ancient question.

Not merely,

"Who am I?"

But,

"Who am I becoming?"

And perhaps the oldest answer still whispers across the centuries with surprising gentleness.

Become worthy before you seek fulfillment.

Admire before you consume.

Attend before you judge.

Walk with courtesy.

The armour has vanished.

The pilgrimage remains.